

We Are Not Alone by cali-chan (girls_are_weird)

Series: Mike, Eleven, and the quiet moments [13]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: A party member requires assistance and it is our duty to provide that assistance, F/M, Freshman year is a bottomless treasure trove, Friendship, Heavily inspired by The Breakfast Club, Hi I'm a nerd and I write long-ass author's notes, Hijinks & Shenanigans, Humor, Romance, Teen Romance, party antics

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

And just like that, the library at Hawkins High had become a war room, a strategy session where all the members of the party devised a plan to protect one of their own. Because that's what friends do. PG-13, friendship/romance, post-S2, Mike/Eleven + party antics. Direct sequel to *[What Makes You Different](#)*.

1. Somebody there to break your fall

Author's Note:

This is a direct sequel to [What Makes You Different](#). Be sure to read that one first if you haven't yet, otherwise there will be aspects of this story that will not make sense.

Notes for the Chapter:

The length of this thing got a little away from me, so instead of posting it as a one-shot, I will be uploading it in two parts, with the second one coming tomorrow. Stay tuned for that!

Mike was waiting for her by the entrance when Hopper parked the Blazer in front of Hawkins High some ten minutes before eight. El did not miss the way Hopper glared at him through the rearview mirror.

"...What?" her adoptive father asked when he looked away from the mirror to find her giving him a deadpan stare.

"He was cheering me up," she reminded him pointedly. She'd already told him the whole story the day before when she explained how she got detention in the first place. He'd seemed worried about her at first, angry that some kid from school was being an asshole to her, and then relieved her friends had been so supportive.

Evidently, though, he'd woken up on the grumpy side of the bed that morning. "And he couldn't do that without having his hands all over you?" he asked, eyebrows raised high on his forehead.

Her stare didn't waver. "We were just kissing," she stated, enunciating the words carefully. She'd also explained this the previous day, too, because her disciplinary note had made it sound worse than it was.

"Right, just kissing." He rolled his eyes, ran a hand through his hair, then leaned forward against the steering wheel, forearms hanging over the dashboard. He was quiet for a few seconds before turning

toward her again. "So, you think you'll be able to keep your lips away from his for the entire detention period?" he asked then, in a too-casual tone, which was betrayed by the corners of his mouth quirking up.

Her stare turned into a glare.

It must've been a hilarious sight because he couldn't stop himself from outright laughing. "Hey, it takes two to tango," it was his turn to point out, amused. "You got yourself into this mess, so now it's my prerogative as a parent to tease you mercilessly about it."

He stretched out a hand to pull on her ponytail, and she begrudgingly let go of her indignation. Even if she didn't like being teased, she could take it from Hopper, because he did it out of affection. And she *did* land herself in detention, after all. "It's almost eight," he pointed out with a smile on his face. "Go on. Wouldn't want to keep Romeo waiting."

"Stoooooop," she groaned in a long-suffering tone, covering her face with her hands. He showed no remorse; if anything, it made him chuckle even more. Dodging his gaze, she grabbed her backpack from the back seat of the truck.

"I'll pick you up at three," he reminded her as she opened the door and shouldered her bag. She closed the door behind her and gave him a nod and a wave through the window before turning toward Mike, who was waiting somewhat awkwardly by the corner.

She pulled him by the hand toward the school before he could say anything more than a strangled "Hey," and ignored the nervous look he shot at the Blazer as Hopper drove off.

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Saturday detentions at Hawkins High took place in the library. This

time around it was just the six of them and Bobby Hastings, who had conked out about a second after responding to Ms. Sanders' roll call when detention period started.

It was kind of funny for two reasons: 1) They weren't supposed to sleep during detention— the rules as stated by their English teacher were for them to do "something productive" with their time, and 2) the reason Bobby Hastings had gotten detention in the first place was for sleeping in class. It was an irony not lost on Ms. Sanders, as she had given up on waking him after a few failed tries, muttering under her breath that "he'll be here again next week, anyway."

Will couldn't help but stare at the boy snoring lightly on the table next to his. Bobby Hastings was a bit of an odd duck: a sophomore, he hung out with the jocks because he was in the wrestling team, but his so-called friends still treated him pretty awfully, calling him nasty nicknames like "Lardass" just because he was a chubby guy, and teasing him because he was always falling asleep in class.

As someone who'd been teased and bullied, Will felt for the boy; he thought he'd probably be a fairly good-looking guy if he lost a little bit of weight, but the popular crowd wasn't going to give him that chance. He was also curious about the whole sleeping-in-class thing; it kind of reminded him of Eleven when she pushed her powers too far, except he was fairly sure Bobby Hastings wasn't out fighting interdimensional monsters on a regular basis (...well, he hoped so, at least). Will wondered why he was always so tired.

Shaking his head, he returned his focus to the sketch he'd been working on— a landscape for his mother's upcoming birthday. In the table directly in front of him, Lucas and Max had started out the morning quietly working on some Algebra homework they both had to turn in on Monday. They'd worked on it for an hour or two, but around 10:30 they'd given up on it. Now, Max had pulled out her Walkman and was listening to music, bobbing her head to some rhythm Will couldn't quite place. Lucas was reading one of his dad's old issues of Popular Mechanics.

Seated beside him at the table, Dustin had spent most of the morning reading comics, but Will could tell even he was starting to get tired of it, as he'd been staring blankly at the same page for the last five

minutes, his eyes glazed over. If even Green Lantern couldn't keep him entertained, that meant he was *really* bored.

On the table situated diagonally to his, in front of Bobby's, sat Mike and Eleven. Mike had pulled out his D&D binder as soon as detention started, and was still diligently working on a campaign. El was reading *The Old Man and the Sea*, which was kind of fascinating to Will because she'd make all sorts of funny faces as she read. He'd taken to doodling cartoony versions of her face on a clean page of his sketchpad, a sort of catalog of El's funniest expressions. He'd show it to her after detention was done; he was sure it'd make her laugh.

The two of them were the only ones allowed to talk to each other, because the book El was reading was for Ms. Sanders' class and so she'd given El permission to ask Mike questions if there was anything in it she didn't fully understand.

Somewhere around eleven, however, Ms. Sanders stood up from where she was sitting behind the librarian's counter, putting her purse, folder, and the stack of papers she'd been grading on top of the desk. The sound startled them all except for Bobby (who was still asleep) and Max (who didn't hear it because of her headphones, but she did notice Lucas jump like three feet in the air so she realized what was happening fairly quickly).

"Alright," Ms. Sanders started as she approached them. "I have some matters I need to attend to, so I will have to leave you alone here for a short period." She put her arms on her hips, trying to appear authoritative. "You all will stay here and behave appropriately. The door to the library will remain open *at all times*, and I will be in the Teacher's Lounge just one hallway over, so if I hear anything out of the ordinary, I will be right back here before you can blink."

Lucas raised his hand. "Can we talk to each other now?"

"Yes," she nodded at him. "Quietly. As long as you keep working on your respective assignments." She looked at all of them, clearly deciding that whatever they had in front of them at the moment looked close enough to schoolwork as to fit that description. "You can eat lunch now if you want."

"Here?" Dustin asked without raising his hand as he leaned forward, a grimace on his face like he found it offensive to eat lunch anywhere but at the cafeteria.

"Yes, here," Ms. Sanders retorted with a pointed look in his direction. "Unless you'd prefer not to eat lunch at all, Mr. Henderson."

"No, ma'am," Dustin replied right away, sinking back into his chair.

"Good. Now," she glared at each of them individually, "no funny business." With that last warning, she spun on her heel and walked out, not without checking that the metal arm that closed the door was in the locked position, so that the door remained open permanently.

A collective sigh sounded in the room the moment she walked out of view. Most of them (the ones who were awake, at least) reached for their bags to get their lunch. Max pushed her headphones down to her neck and leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. "This *blows*," she exclaimed with a huff, somehow summing everyone's mood in two words.

"Tell me about it," Lucas muttered as he pulled out a bagged lunch his mother had packed for him. "I've read the same article like twenty times already. It's literally the only good thing in this issue, and it's the only one I thought to bring with me."

"I think my eyes are going to stay permanently crossed," Dustin added, dumping the contents of his own lunch— a wrapped sandwich with the crusts cut off, and a ton of assorted snacks— on the table in front of him. A bag of Reese's Pieces hit Will's arm, and he resolved to ask Dustin for some when he opened it.

"I've re-started this campaign three times already, and it *still sucks*," Mike intervened with a groan as he dropped his head against his binder on the table.

Will shrugged. "At least some of us have found ways to be productive," he said as he unpacked his own lunch. Jonathan had packed him a container of soup and a bag of Oreo knock-offs, along with a chicken-scratched note that read "Eat up, jailbird," which

made him chuckle. As he put the piece of paper back in his bag, he turned to Eleven. "How's the book, El?"

She turned to him and the grimace on her face said it all, though she still explained it with words. Well, *a* word. "Boring," she said, then turned to Mike. "Who's DiMaggio?" she asked, pronouncing the name slowly.

Mike shrugged as he pulled a bunch of Tupperware containers from his bag. "I dunno. Some football player, I think?"

"Baseball," Max corrected from the opposite table. "He's from San Francisco, but he played for the Yankees." Will had been about to ask how Max knew that, since she'd never mentioned liking baseball, but it made sense if he was from California. El nodded, probably recognizing the Yankees because Hopper did watch baseball.

Dustin nudged him with his elbow. "Did you finish your drawing for your mom?" he asked, signaling at his sketchpad with a nod of his head.

"Almost," he replied, showing him the sketch. Dustin gave him a thumbs-up. "It still kinda sucks, though," Will added as he closed his sketchpad and set it aside for the moment. "I could've been home playing *Defender II*," he finished with a sigh.

"Lucky you," Dustin retorted with a scoff. "I'm grounded until summer vacation, but all you have to do is bat your lashes and go 'Mommy, I was only skipping class because I was trying to help El' and Mrs. B lets you off the hook just like that!"

Will shook his head at his histrionics as he carefully opened his thermos of soup. "You know your mom would've let you off the hook, too, if you hadn't burst into the girls' locker room," he pointed out smartly. Dustin's mom thought everything he did was the best thing ever. Well, almost.

"We were trying to keep Max from killing Stacey!" he retorted, signaling at himself and Lucas, who had turned around in his chair and was following the conversation intently. "What were we supposed to do, wait outside and pray?"

"I wasn't going to *kill* her," Max intervened in her defense as she split a piece of her PB&J sandwich. "I was just going to make sure she needed to put way more makeup on than she already does if she wanted to leave her house looking like a normal human."

Lucas winced and Dustin just stared at her, muttering "*Mental*" under his breath. El tried to laugh around the Eggo she'd just bit into, and Mike scoffed, even though he was still sorting out the million and one Tupperware containers his mother had packed for him.

"And anyway," Max shrugged, as if she hadn't just admitted to attempting to disfigure another person, "it's your own dumb fault for getting grounded. I just told my mom and stepdad I was looking for a friend who wasn't feeling well, and all I got was some extra chores."

"Wait, you didn't tell your parents you got all up in Marcie and Patty's faces because they wouldn't tell you where Stacey was?" Dustin asked, frowning lightly.

"Are you *insane*? Neil would *murder* me if he knew I almost started up a fight in school," Max retorted with a scowl. "Like, I know that you're all really into the whole 'friends don't lie' thing, but these are *parents*. They don't exactly count."

Dustin's frown did not abate, and Will knew he'd just come to some sort of realization. It was dawning on Mike and Lucas, too. "Um, you do know that a parent or guardian has to sign you out when detention is over, right?" Mike asked, unsure.

Max shrugged again. "Yeah. So?"

"So, what they have to sign is your disciplinary note," Lucas explained quickly in a no-nonsense tone, looking kind of surprised that Max didn't know this already. "You know, the one that details *exactly why you were given detention*."

It took a few seconds for his words to sink in Max's mind, but Will knew when they did because she went really pale and her eyes went really wide. "What? No." She looked at each one of them as if hoping they'd tell her they were just pulling her leg. "It's not like that in California!"

"Well, welcome to Hawkins," Dustin muttered, gesturing around them as if the library was Exhibit A of how different Hawkins was to the West Coast, as if Max hadn't been living in town for over a year and a half already and could tell that on her own.

"So, you have to 'fess up about lying to your parents," Lucas started again, trying to minimize the situation, obviously, to get Max to relax a bit. She looked like she'd seen a ghost. "So you get grounded or something. Welcome to the club."

"No, you don't get it," Max shook her head, looking absolutely terrified. "Neil *can't* know. I'm not kidding when I say he'll kill me. You remember Billy, right? Why do you think he's the way he is?"

"Steve says he was dropped on his head as a child one too many times," Dustin supplied with a shrug, looking as lost as Will felt. Nobody liked getting grounded, sure, but Max looked seriously spooked. Were they missing something?

"No, he was *beaten* as a child one too many times," Max threw back and that was around the time when it dawned on all of them that, yes, they were missing kind of *a lot*. Even Eleven, who'd mostly stayed quiet the entire conversation, seemed shaken by the revelation.

"What?!" Dustin was the first to break the silence, aghast.

"Are you serious?!" Mike asked, slackjawed.

"Yes!" Max responded frantically.

"That's crazy!" Lucas interjected, wide-eyed. Then something occurred to him, and he frowned. "Wait, but has he ever— to you—?"

Max shook her head emphatically. "No. Usually he just yells a lot, but he's never hit me." She bit her lip, nervous. "But it's not like I want to try him, either." She wrapped her arms around herself, almost defensively. "What am I gonna do, you guys? I'm so dead. I'm *fucked*."

"Maybe not," Mike said, his features schooled into the expression Will had come to recognize through the years as his "thinking face," his Paladin face. "There's gotta be something we can do to stop your

stepdad from seeing your disciplinary note."

"Maybe we could steal it," Dustin threw in a suggestion.

"No, what we need is to *replace* it," Lucas corrected, and just like that, the library at Hawkins High had become a war room, a strategy session where all the members of the party devised a plan to protect one of their own. Because that's what friends do.

"Okay, does anyone know where the notes are?" Mike asked.

"Ms. Sanders is carrying them in her folder," Will pointed out, happy to have something to contribute to the conversation. Sometimes being observant came in handy. "That's where she put them after she called roll. And she took the folder with her."

"To the Teacher's Lounge," Dustin added, and Mike nodded. "Do you think she's doing anything important in there?"

"She's probably just watching *Punky Brewster* reruns or something," Lucas retorted with an eye roll and a shake of his head.

"It doesn't matter what she's doing; all that matters is whether we can get her away from her folder or not," Mike reeled the conversation back to the point before turning to Will. "If we manage to get hold of Max's note, do you think you can forge the writing?"

Will hated being put on the spot like that, but... it was for Max, so he had to do it. "I can try," he replied. He'd had to forge his mother's signature a few times in the past— not for anything bad, but because she sometimes forgot to sign permission slips even though she'd already told him she would. It happened sometimes when she had to work double shifts and came home really tired, and Will didn't have the heart to wake her up just to get her to sign stuff. He was pretty good at it, if he did say so himself.

Mike nodded. "Good. So we need to find a clean pad of disciplinary notes. Do you think Sanders brought hers, too?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure the librarian must have one somewhere around here," Dustin informed them. "Steve told me once that he got detention for talking too loud in here." He mock-shuddered. "Harsh."

"If we're going to look for it, we're going to have to close the door," Lucas pointed out before everyone could get too excited. "Our voices don't carry as far as the Teacher's Lounge, but if we're going to start rummaging around here... that's risky."

"You're right," Mike nodded. He looked at the door for a moment, then back at the group. "We could just loosen the screws of the stopper or something, but that would be too obvious. Anyone would know just by taking one look at it that we sabotaged it. Any other ideas?"

He'd barely finished speaking when there was a loud *snap* and the door of the library swung closed. The metal arm had snapped in half — *literally* in half; the solid metal part, too, not just the joint. The five of them simultaneously turned to stare at it wide-eyed, then at El, whose nose was bleeding... and then at Bobby Hastings.

There was a tense moment of silence.

"I think... I think he's dead to the world," Will declared, still keeping his eyes on the sleeping boy for a second longer, just in case. The others took his stillness as a triumph and breathed a sigh of relief.

Mike shook his head. "At least warn us ahead of time if you're going to do something like that," he told Eleven with a frown as he handed her a napkin from his lunch bag. "In case we need to come up with an excuse or something. What if he had seen?"

She shrugged. "He didn't," she sentenced as she wiped her nose with the napkin. She didn't seem repentant in the least bit.

"Okay," Dustin spoke, continuing on from where they left off, "so how do we get Sanders out of the Teacher's Lounge?"

"And without her stuff," Will reminded them. This would all be for nothing if Ms. Sanders just took her folder with her wherever she went.

"We need a distraction," Lucas declared.

"Maybe we could knock out the power?" Max suggested. She seemed a bit less scared, somewhat back to her regular, confident self now

that a plan was actually starting to take shape. "Could El do that?"

Eleven seemed unsure. "I think so," she admitted carefully. "But it's risky. Could blow the whole thing up."

"Yeah, no, let's not do that," Dustin refuted immediately, exchanging a glance with Mike and Lucas. Will remembered they told him about Eleven using the Heathkit to look for him while he was missing— and how it burst into flames. Probably not a good idea to pull something like that with the entire Hawkins High power grid.

"Right, so we do it old school," Mike switched gears immediately. "Someone goes to the distribution panel and flips the breakers. Sanders will go take a look, or go call someone to fix it or something, and that'll get her away from the Teacher's Lounge, so one of us can go in and get the disciplinary note. By the time she goes back to the Lounge, we'll already be back here."

"We can't just be wandering the halls completely blind, though," Max noted. "We need to know at least when she actually leaves the Teacher's Lounge, and when she starts heading back. Otherwise she'll catch us and we'll really be screwed."

"I can do it," El affirmed, determined, and once again everyone turned to look at her.

"In the void?" Mike asked, understanding straight away what she meant, as he usually did.

Eleven nodded. "I'll need a radio. And something to cover my eyes." Will still wasn't exactly sure how her powers worked, but he knew from experience that she could find people with her mind, so he took her word for it.

"Do you have your bandanna?" Dustin asked Lucas.

"I didn't bring it with me," Lucas admitted, his expression morphing into a scowl when Dustin groaned in disappointment. "What? I didn't exactly anticipate that I'd be going into battle today!"

"There's a supply closet for the janitors right next door," Mike broke in before the two of them could start arguing. "There might be some

towels or rags in there that you can use," he told El, who nodded.

None of the boys had brought their walkies with them (why would they need them if they were all stuck in the same room for seven hours?), but Max's Walkman had FM radio reception, so that's what El would use. The range wasn't the greatest, but she didn't need anything too powerful since she'd only be searching on school grounds anyway.

"Alright, so we look for the blank disciplinary notes, then we split up," Dustin started once they'd shown Eleven how to work the radio on Max's Walkman. "El goes to the janitor's closet. Mike, you stay with her as a lookout." They both nodded. "Once El has a lock on Sanders, Lucas goes to the distribution panel and flips as many of the breakers as he can."

"Wait, why am I on my own?" Lucas protested.

"Because the distribution panel is on the opposite end of the school and you're the fastest out of all of us," Dustin retorted. They were familiar with the distribution panel from A/V Club. "All you have to do is flip the breakers and hide until she goes away. Then you just come back to the library and that's it. Even if she doesn't go straight back to the Teacher's Lounge, you'll see her before she sees you, dude," he explained, making it sound really easy. Will wasn't convinced it would be, but Lucas was crafty, so it made sense for him to handle that part of the plan.

"If I get caught, you're taking the blame," Lucas retorted, not entirely convinced, but going with it for the sake of the plan.

"I swear on my comics collection," Dustin promised, solemnly raising a hand in the air. "Okay, then once Sanders leaves the Teacher's Lounge to check the distribution panel, Max and I break in and steal her disciplinary note. You can pick the lock, right?"

Max nodded, already brandishing a bunch of hairpins Eleven had lent her for that express purpose. Dustin nodded in acknowledgment. "Good. So once each task is completed, we reconvene here, and it'll be like nothing's happened."

"Except for the door," Lucas reminded them.

"We can explain the door," Dustin assured him with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Wait, what am I doing while all these tasks are being completed?" Will asked, suddenly realizing that they hadn't given him anything to do in this grand master plan. Usually when that happened, that meant he had the worst task of all.

"You stay here in case Sanders comes by unexpectedly," Mike revealed, somewhat sheepishly. "Or in case Bobby wakes up." In either case, he knew Will wouldn't like that.

And, indeed, he didn't. He immediately felt dread starting to creep up his spine. "What? No, you guys," he pleaded, "you know I'm *terrible* at lying. And even *worse* at coming up with excuses on the fly! There's gotta be something else I can do. Maybe I can be El's lookout, instead?"

They all looked at him like the question itself was utterly ridiculous. Which it was, he admitted to himself, because there was no way Mike was splitting up from Eleven unless someone pried them apart with a crowbar. And anyway, if it came down to it, Will didn't really want to have to explain why he was hiding in a janitor's closet with a girl who had a piece of cloth covering her eyes. He was sure he would die on the spot.

"I mean, you could switch with Lucas, I guess?" Dustin offered. "But you're slower than him, and if you run into Sanders in the hallways, you'll be on your own."

Will didn't like those odds, either. "Hngh," he groaned, indecisive, before finally relenting. "Fine, I'll stay here. But I cannot be held responsible for anything I tell her. You know my brain just disconnects from my mouth when I get nervous."

"It'll be fine," Mike assured him, always trying to prop up Will's self-confidence. "She probably won't even come by here. The power outage will keep her busy, I'm sure." Will sure hoped he was right.

"Everybody's good, then?" Dustin asked, looking around at everyone. When they all nodded, he grinned, obviously excited. "Awesome. Let's do this!"

Notes for the Chapter:

As I mentioned in my note at the beginning, there will be a second part to this story, which I will be posting tomorrow (be sure to subscribe, follow or bookmark so you don't miss it!). I'm sure you can tell by now that this story is much more Party-centric than Mike/Eleven-centric, but Mike and Eleven *will* still get their quiet moment in part 2, so I decided to include it in the series anyway. Also, part 2 turned out quite a bit longer than part 1, because ~shenanigans~. What can I say; *The Breakfast Club* is one of my favorite movies of all time and these six children *own me*.

In case it wasn't clear from the chapter, the reasons the kids got detention: Max, for starting a commotion in the girls' locker room and threatening Stacey's friends; Dustin and Lucas, for bursting into the girls' locker room to stop Max and adding to the aforementioned commotion; Will, for running in the halls and skipping class; and Mike and Eleven, as detailed in [*What Makes You Different*](#).

Bobby's nickname of "Lardass" comes from the classic pie-eating-contest scene in *Stand by Me*, another one of my favorite movies of all time. Sony's Walkman series of cassette players had been around since the 70s, but it wasn't until 1984 that they started including FM radio reception. Popular Mechanics is a science/tech magazine that has been in publication since 1902. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a novel by Ernest Hemingway that is widely recognized (by me, at least) as the most boring book in the history of the world. Joe DiMaggio (who gets mentioned a *lot* in that book) was a Major League Baseball Hall-of-

Famer who played for the Yankees his entire career; he was also married to Hollywood actresses Dorothy Arnold and Marilyn Monroe.

Defender II was an arcade game that was ported to the Atari consoles in 1984; the Atari version was called *Stargate*, but Will, being an avid purveyor of the arcade, would probably know it by its original name. Marcie and Patty were named after *Peanuts* characters. *Punky Brewster* was an NBC TV show starring Soleil Moon Frye about an orphaned girl being raised by a foster parent and, as far as I'm concerned, the best sitcom of the 80s.

The title of this fic, as well as the chapter titles, come from the song "We Are Not Alone" by Karla DeVito, which is featured on the *Breakfast Club* soundtrack. (People only think of Simple Minds when they think of that movie, but really the entire soundtrack is a masterpiece of teen angst and friendship and rebellion). I contemplated using different lines from the song instead because [I already have a fic in this series that has the word "alone" in the title](#), but then I decided "We Are Not Alone" worked too well not to use it, and went with the other lines as chapter titles.

2. This thing called trust

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a direct sequel to [What Makes You Different](#). Be sure to read that one first if you haven't yet, otherwise there will be aspects of this story that will not make sense.

Dustin's excitement gave way to panic a little more every few seconds Max couldn't get the Teacher's Lounge open. "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up," he chanted under his breath, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The hallway lights hadn't come back on yet, so he knew Sanders wasn't on her way back yet, but the silence made him nervous.

"Oh, I'm sorry, would *you* like to try?!" Max barked at him, only taking her eyes off the door for one second to glare at him before going back to the two pins she was pushing around inside the lock.

Actually, he would. He was sure he could get it done at some point—how hard could it be to pick a lock with a hairpin, anyway?—but he knew they didn't have enough time for him to figure it out, so instead he replied, "No, but you have to be quicker! We're sitting ducks out here."

He thought he heard her mutter something along the lines of "*You're a duck*," and, okay, she was not in the mood for analogies, then. Before he could say anything else, though, she spoke out loud again. "At least I'm *trying* to be useful!"

"Sorry! Okay? Sorry," he relented, recognizing that she was right, up to a point—she was doing all the work and he was just standing there. But that was the plan, right? His part came later. "You know how I get. I just didn't know it would take this long. It always seems much quicker in the movies."

"The movies aren't real," Max mumbled as she narrowed her eyes at the pins, the tip of her tongue just peeking out from between her lips as she focused. It took Dustin great willpower not to point out that

sometimes the movies could be sort of real; one of their friends happened to be pretty much a real-life Jedi, after all. "Sometimes it takes a few minutes..."

She trailed off abruptly, and for a moment Dustin feared something had gone wrong, like she'd damaged the lock or something (oh no, could that actually happen?). But then she smirked. "Got it." She stood up quickly and, pins still sticking out of the lock, she turned the handle. The door opened without a problem. "Voilà," she added, gesturing triumphantly at the now-available Teacher's Lounge.

Dustin grinned widely. "That was *awesome*," he exclaimed, immediately forgetting all his complaints about it taking too long. He was reminded exactly why he'd so quickly developed a crush on Mad Max back in middle school. She might not be able to move stuff with her mind, but she was still pretty damn amazing.

She smiled brightly at him, pretending to wipe dust off her shoulders. "Thank you, thank you," she said, taking her victory lap before going straight back to business. "Okay, now to find that disciplinary note."

"Go go go," Dustin pushed the door open wider and gestured for her to go in. Once she did, he swung the door closed again, leaving it open just a sliver. He stood vigil outside, eyes fixed on the one end of the hallway Sanders might come from as the sound of rustling papers made its way to his ears from within the room.

"Did you find the folder?" he stage-whispered through the gap between the door and the doorframe when he heard the sounds coming from inside cease.

"Yes, but I can't see which note's mine! It's too dark in here," she replied in a similar tone. He found that strange since he knew the Teacher's Lounge to have windows, but maybe Ms. Sanders had closed the blinds or something. Who knew.

As if in response to her plight, the hallway lights blinked back on. Dustin heard Max exclaim "Oh! That's better," and figured the lights had come on inside the Teacher's Lounge as well.

"Hurry up!" he prodded her again, nervousness springing back up. "If the power's back on, that means Sanders is probably on her way back here."

"Almost got it!" Max replied, the sound of shuffling paper once again in the background of her words. "I'm just going through... o-ho! What's this?" She sounded surprised but not in a bad way, more amused than anything else.

"What?" Dustin asked, now curious as hell, swinging the door open just a little bit more and poking his head into the room. "What is it?"

"Nothing!" she said, in an entirely-too-innocent tone that made Dustin instantly suspicious, before quickly closing the folder she'd been poring over. "Got it," she let him know, waving a little rectangular piece of paper in her hand. Her disciplinary note, Dustin figured.

"Great, now put everything back where it was. We gotta get out of here." Max nodded and started unshuffling all the papers and objects she'd shuffled around in the first place, and Dustin kept watch in the hallway again. They were almost done with their task, and their plan seemed to be running smoothly for once. He could only hope it stayed that way.

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Lucas carefully poked his head up from behind the desk he was using for cover as Ms. Sanders and the janitor she'd brought in to help her made their way out of the room, door closing behind them. They'd come in, conferenced a little bit in front of the distribution panel, then the janitor quickly reset the breakers and the lights around them all came back on. Then they left. It had all gone the way they planned, thankfully.

He gave it a minute or so, just to be safe, before he stood up from behind the desk and went to the door, ready to go back to the library. He was almost home free. Except when he turned the handle, the

door did not open.

Shit.

He tried again. And again. And again. The door wouldn't budge, no matter how much or how hard he pushed against it. Sanders or the janitor must've locked it from the outside when they left.

Shit shit shit shit shit.

He was locked in. *Goddamn it.*

He looked around the room trying to find something that could help him get out, and came up short. The distribution panel was inside a storage room on the west end of the school, where they kept extra desks and furniture they could bring out to replace anything that broke. There were no windows, no backdoors, not even a "break glass in case of emergency" case containing an ax or a hammer or something he could use to break down the door. Or try to, at least.

He could just bang on the door and yell until someone walked by and got him out, he guessed, but he'd get at least another detention for sure. Still, it was better than staying locked in there for the rest of his life, he figured.

He was just contemplating whether it would be better to break a leg off a desk and use *that* to bang against the door when he noticed one of the ceiling tiles in the back of the room was loose.

He stared at it dispassionately for a minute. *I am going to kill Dustin.*

He pushed a bookcase until it was directly underneath the loose tile, propping a desk against the taller piece of furniture so that it wouldn't topple over. Then he clambered up on it as best he could without falling to his death. Pushing the PVC tile to the side, he poked his head into the hatch it created, leading to the space between the actual roof of the building and the decorative ceiling below.

The hole in the ceiling was wide enough for him to go in, and the space between the roof and the tiles was tall enough that he could probably crawl through it on his hands and knees. The metal

framework that held the ceiling tiles up seemed sturdy enough— now all he had to do was pray that the PVC tiles could hold his weight.

He took a deep breath to prop up his confidence and pulled himself up to the crawl space. Or tried to, at least. *If I manage to get out of this without breaking my neck, I'm going to start lifting weights*, he thought to himself as he struggled to pull his weight up. *I swear on my action figures collection*. He was pretty sure out of his friends he was the one with the most upper-body strength, but then again, that wasn't saying much.

Finally, after much huffing and puffing, he managed to pull his knees up onto the back face of the ceiling tiles. The PVC seemed to be holding just fine, he noted gratefully, and looked around. He was glad now that his dad was an avid outdoorsman and had honed Lucas's sense of direction since he was a child. He knew more or less where he had to go if he wanted to make it back to the library, although it wasn't going to be easy, since every inch of this absurd, claustrophobic crawl space looked exactly the same.

Still, nowhere to go but forward.

The irony was not lost on him, as he started to crawl really carefully on top of the ceiling tiles, that he'd been assigned this "task" because he was the fastest runner in the group, and he hadn't even gotten to run once since.

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Will's attention was startled away from his sketchpad when someone abruptly pushed the door to the library open. "Why is the door closed?" came Ms. Sanders' voice as she tried to lock the door again, not realizing yet that it wasn't going to work. "I said earlier that it had to stay open at all times!"

"It broke, ma'am," Will said, getting up from the table and walking toward where she was. "It just broke a little while ago. I think the door is just too heavy for that type of metal arm," he added, pointing

toward the broken piece, hoping he was being convincing.

"Hmmm," the English teacher intoned, pushing the door open once again and letting it close on its own, like she couldn't believe it on Will's word alone. After a few more tries, she finally gave up. "Fine, then," she conceded. "It'll have to stay closed. I'll call in a repairman."

She turned toward the library proper. "Are your classmates done eating lunch?" She walked past Will and toward the tables, where she would find... no one but Bobby Hastings, still snoring away.

Will hurried to catch up to her. "Um, no— uh— not exactly—" He urgently tried to come up with an explanation for his friends' absence. He'd been thinking about it earlier, but every idea that crossed his mind sounded stupid, and now he was left to come up with one on the spot. And failing at it.

"Where is everyone?" Ms. Sanders asked, scandalized, when she came up to the tables, all empty except for one.

"They went to, uh—" Will started once he caught up to her. "They went to get— *water*! Yes, they went to get water. No one brought anything to drink, so they went to the water fountain to get water to wash down the food..."

Ms. Sanders frowned, hands on her hips. "I just walked by a water fountain. They weren't there."

Busted. "Oh, um," Will tried again. Where else could you get water or something to drink in this building? "They... must've gone to the soda machines in the cafeteria!" the thought finally popped into his head. "Yeah, they probably realized the water fountain wasn't going to work with the power off, so they had to go to the cafeteria to get something to drink."

She looked at him like she'd just told him he'd been abducted by a monster when he was twelve. "But the soda machines wouldn't work with the power off, either."

Busted again! "Well— uh— sometimes when you bang your hand against the side of the machine, a can or two will drop, even if the

machine is off." Or at least that's what he'd heard. He'd never actually tried it himself. It sounded like a logical enough explanation, though, didn't it?

Ms. Sanders' expression only became more bewildered. "Without paying for them?"

Jesus, he just kept digging himself deeper! "I-I'm sure they'll leave some money behind, it's just that, um—" *What do I say what do I say what do I say?* "—They're *really* thirsty. We haven't had anything to drink since the morning and they're all very dehydrated, and dehydration is really bad for you, you know? Terrible for productivity. Do you know the symptoms of dehydration?" *Oh, God, I'm so bad at this.* "You can get headaches, confusion, tiredness, seizures—"

"That's quite alright, Byers," Ms. Sanders cut him off, thankfully before he got to the part about reduced urination; that had been the next symptom that was about to come out of his mouth. "It doesn't matter, anyway; the power is back on now. I'll go look for them and tell them to get water at the fountain and then come straight back here. They can't be wandering the halls without my permission."

She spun on her heel and walked out of the library again, and for a minute or so, Will was frozen in place, not knowing what to do. It was only when the door swung closed that he snapped out of it. "Oh, *shoot!*" he exclaimed, realizing that she was going to be walking through the school again, and he needed to let the others know before they got caught.

He quickly made his way to the door, opened it as quietly as he could, and caught sight of Ms. Sanders just turning the corner toward the cafeteria. He watched her from the corner until she was completely out of sight, then hightailed it as fast as he could toward the Teacher's Lounge, to warn Dustin and Max.

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Mike closed the closet door behind him just as El was taking off her blindfold. "Okay, I just told Dustin and Max we're a go," he let her know, pulling out a napkin he'd grabbed from his lunch bag just for this purpose and handing it to El so she could wipe the blood off her face. "Still on her way to the storage room?"

Eleven nodded from she was sitting on a dusty chair they'd found in the back of the closet. "She went to get the janitor, but now they're both going there." They'd also found a flashlight in one of the shelves, which they promptly pointed up to give themselves a little light now that the power was out. Storage closets didn't exactly require windows.

"Let's hope Lucas already found a place to hide," Mike acknowledged, moving closer to where she was. "You're still doing okay? No dizziness or anything?" he asked, concerned that she may be using her powers too much. "I brought a pack of Twix with me if you think you need to get some strength back," he added, pulling the aforementioned candy (which he'd stolen from Dustin's stash earlier) from his pocket.

"Mike," she grabbed his forearm to get his attention. "I feel fine. This isn't so hard. I've had practice," she pointed out, and Mike felt his cheeks flare when he realized that meant practice on *him*— mostly, at least— particularly during their year of separation, and even after, sometimes when they had to be apart for extended periods of time.

"Oh," he replied eloquently. "Okay. Well, just let me know if it ever gets to be too much," he told her, cognizant that they'd have to check on Ms. Sanders at least a couple more times. "Still want the chocolate?"

She smiled as he handed her the bag of Twix, opening it quickly and, contrary to what Mike was expecting, handing him one of the two bars. "Thanks!" He took it gratefully; he hadn't finished eating lunch because they had to get the plan into motion, so the extra sugar was welcome.

"So how does it work, anyway?" Mike posited, because he'd never really thought to ask before. He leaned against the shelf as he bit into his Twix bar. "Can you see everything that's around the person?"

She'd explained to him before what the void looked like to her—completely black, but she could still see other people like there was a light source nearby, and the ground was covered with liquid. But Mike, being Mike, was still curious.

El shook her head. "Just them. Sometimes things." She took a bite of her own chocolate bar, so it took her a minute to continue speaking. "When they're holding something, or are near something," she added with a shrug. "Chairs. Books." She looked up at Mike. "The blanket fort."

He tried very hard to not blush again, but the swoop in his stomach told him he probably didn't succeed. "So how do you know where they are, then? If you can't see the place, I mean," he clarified quickly.

She cocked her head slightly to one side, contemplative. "It's more like a feeling," she explained. "Here," she added, pointing at her temple.

Mike nodded. He didn't really understand it, but he figured he never would, so it really was no use to dwell on it. Not that it didn't fascinate him either way. "So was Ms. Sanders grading papers when she was in the Teacher's Lounge? Could you tell?"

She smiled mischievously, then shook her head. "Television," she revealed. "*Punky Brewster*."

Mike couldn't hold back a snort. "Seriously?" he laughed. Who would've thought their English teacher, who always seemed so serious discussing the intricacies of literary classics, was shirking her responsibilities to go watch a children's show? Wait until the guys heard about it.

He threw the last bit of his Twix bar into his mouth and went over to the closet door, opening it just a bit to take a look outside. The lights in the hallway were still out, and everything was quiet. "I think we should give it maybe five more minutes before we check in on Sanders again," he suggested, knowing it wouldn't take too long to flip the breakers.

He turned, closing the door behind him, and looked at El, who was standing up as he spoke, leaving the towel she was using as a blindfold on top of her empty chair. "We could go back to the library for a while if you want. This place is pretty stuffy."

She shook her head, taking a few steps closer to him. "Mike," she called him, extending a hand for him to hold. The closet was small enough that it took little effort for her to reach him.

"Yeah?" he said, taking her hand in his without even thinking about it.

"Yesterday," she added as she came to a stop right in front of him.

"What about yesterday?" he asked, not completely understanding. She was looking up at him with hope in her eyes, but he couldn't help but frown at her words— she wasn't still dwelling on all that bullshit Stacey had said about her, was she? He hoped she hadn't spent the entire day thinking about that.

She looked down, almost shyly, before raising her gaze to meet his again, and when she spoke again, he finally understood what she meant. "I liked it," she said, her beautiful brown eyes almost glinting gold in the low yellow glow of the flashlight. Pretty much everything about the previous day had sucked except for the kisses they shared behind the bleachers, so that *had* to be what she was talking about.

A swarm of butterflies erupted in Mike's stomach. It's not like he thought she didn't like kissing— he knew how to read her reactions fairly well by then and she always seemed to enjoy it— but hearing her say it was an entirely new level of mindblowing. "I-I, uh, I liked it, too," he admitted, unable to hold back a goofy smile. He was sure he was blushing again, too, and he wondered (not for the first time) how in the world she could always make him so flustered with so few words.

Upon his words, her lips immediately drew into a bright grin. "We should do it again," she told him with an eager nod of her head, so eager that it caused her ponytail to bounce energetically behind her.

"Y-yeah! Of course!" he responded right away because— please, as if

he would ever say no to kissing El. Every time their lips touched it felt like the best moment of his life, and that was without taking into account that the way they kissed the previous day was... something else. Something they'd never tried before, and something he definitely, absolutely, positively wanted to try again.

"Maybe once I'm not grounded anymore we could go somewhere, and we can get some time alone..." He thought she would like this suggestion, but when he saw her smile start to fade, he wondered if he'd said something wrong. "What? What is it?"

"I thought..."

She didn't finish the sentence but squeezed his hand, taking one step closer to him. Which meant she was really, *really* close— as in within kissing distance, and that's when he understood what she wanted. "Oh. Wait, you mean like right now?" She didn't answer, just looked expectantly at him.

It's not like he didn't want to kiss her— he always wanted to kiss her, all the time— but in these particular circumstances, he was unsure. "I just... do you think that's a good idea? We already got in trouble once for kissing at school..."

Her expression fell, and she pulled her hand away from his, and that's when he realized he was being the biggest idiot on the face of the Earth. "I mean—" He hurried to take hold of her hand again before she could get too far. "I guess one time couldn't hurt, right?" He tugged her closer by the hand and before she could say anything in reply, cupped her cheek and lowered his lips to hers.

She let out a sound in the back of her throat, a pleased little sigh like someone finding a drink of water after hours of thirst, and returned his kiss so enthusiastically that he felt his back push against the door behind him. She let go of his hand only to raise both of hers to the back of his neck, the tips of her fingers sliding against his nape in a way that drew a shiver out of him.

His arm wrapped around her waist and drew her closer, giving him leverage to open his mouth and deepen the kiss without having to bend over too far. Her lips tasted like chocolate, like the Trix bar

they'd shared just a few minutes ago, and the reminder made him smile against her mouth.

She pulled back just slightly to catch a breath, and he chased her lips instinctively, pecking at her softly until she kissed him fully again. The next time they separated, both gasping into each other's mouths, Eleven leaned her forehead against his. "I really like kissing you," she told him, breathless.

"I really *love* kissing you," the words were out of his mouth before he realized it, but he didn't mind; it was true, after all. He closed his eyes, savoring the sensation of having her in his arms. "I thought I wasn't going to get to kiss you again," he admitted before leaning in again to nip at her upper lip with his own.

"Why?" she questioned after she kissed him one more time, short and sweet. She linked her hands behind his neck and rested her head against the crook of his neck, sighing happily.

"Figured Hopper would be angry enough to keep me away from you at least until college," he responded, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

She shook her head against his shoulder, her eyelashes brushing against his neck. "He likes you," she assured him, sounding fully confident about it.

"That tickles," he told her with a chuckle.

"Sorry," she replied, pulling her head back just a little.

He pulled her closer. "No, I don't mind." It's not like it was bad enough to make him flinch or anything. "And sure, he might like me in general, but I bet he's not very happy with me now that I went and landed you in detention."

"You didn't land me in detention," she assured him, voice slightly muffled because her face was pressed against his shoulder. "It takes two to tango."

Mike chuckled. "Do you know what that means?" he asked, not in a mean way or putting her down or anything, but rather just wanting

to make sure. As much as her vocabulary had improved since they first met, sometimes she still had a bit of trouble with certain expressions, and he wanted to make sure she understood what she was saying so she didn't unknowingly end up in an embarrassing situation.

She shrugged— which could mean yes, or no, or kind of— but didn't ask him to explain. "Hopper said it," she stated instead, as if that was enough of a reason to use it in this context. "He wasn't mad. Well, he was a little mad, but not at you. Not really. He was glad you were there for me."

"I'll always be there for you," he promised her, once again almost without intending to. Normally he'd be mortified at all these heavy sentiments pouring out of his mouth unbidden, but Eleven had a way of drawing his feelings out of him with just a look, just a word, and he didn't mind too much as long as she was the only one around to witness it. It was better than babbling like an idiot, anyway.

"And so will the others," he added after a second, because the rest of the party had been worried about El, too, and tried to help her in their own way— to the point of ending up in detention right along with them. "That's what friends do," he concluded, dropping a kiss on her head.

"I know," she said simply, but squeezed him tighter, needing to lift herself onto her tiptoes so she could wrap her arms fully around him. He dropped his face against her shoulder, catching the scent of her perfume, a sweet, vanilla-like scent that made him smile because it was so El.

They stayed like that for a little bit, but eventually he had to know: "So... you didn't get grounded?" Normally they talked every night, either on the phone or via their Supercomms, but after Mike had gotten the Godzilla of all lectures from his mother the previous afternoon, he'd been forbidden from using the phone, as well as going anywhere but to school and back home for the next two weeks, and he didn't want to radio Eleven just in case she was getting a similar reprimand from Hopper; he didn't want to make things worse for her.

So he'd decided to wait until he saw her today, but then they weren't

allowed to speak for *hours* even though they'd been sitting right next to each other all morning, which meant this was the first chance he got to actually ask.

She shook her head and pulled back a little, just so she could look at his face when she spoke. "I can still watch TV. And I can hang out with you guys, like always. But," she grimaced, "I did get detention, so I have to clean the bathroom for a month. No powers."

Mike couldn't stop himself from chuckling at her disgusted expression. He knew cleaning the bathroom was her least-favorite chore and he really shouldn't be laughing, but the way she crinkled her nose and pouted was just absolutely adorable, so he couldn't help it.

"Well, I can't play video games *or* hang out with you guys outside of school for two weeks," he let her know, his mirth fizzling out as he realized not for the first time just how boring the next couple of weeks were going to be. "But on the positive side, at least I'll have plenty of time to write a kickass campaign— whoa!"

He found himself suddenly pushed forward, and consequently pushing El backward, when someone attempted to open the door of the storage closet. He barely managed to grab hold of El's arms so she didn't fall or hurt herself, but once their feet were both firmly planted on the floor, they exchanged a panicked glance and turned toward the door, sure that they were about to be caught by Ms. Sanders.

Instead, it was Dustin who poked his head in.

He took one quick look around at the closet, then zeroed in on Mike and Eleven standing on the other side of the door— specifically the way they were holding onto each other. He sighed as if disappointed in them. "Seriously? Have you no restraint? We're on a mission, here!"

"We're not— You— you pushed us with the door, dumbass!" Mike retorted, his brain debating between getting flustered or getting angry for only a split second before settling on anger. "Besides, you're one to talk about *restraint* when you spend Geography class ogling girls in their gym clothes," he pointed out.

His curly-haired best friend took a moment to think about that. "Yeah, you have a point there," he admitted. Mike figured he had the upper hand as long as Dustin never found out what they'd been doing just a few minutes ago— he was sure his friend had his suspicions, but there was no way he could prove it.

"Anyway, come on, guys," Dustin added. "Lights are back on and Sanders is on her way to the cafeteria. We can go back to the library now." Mike looked past Dustin's head to see that, indeed, the hallway was a lot more illuminated now than it had been when the power was out. He and El had been so busy with their... conversation... that they'd forgotten to turn on the closet lights, or check the hallway, or look in on Sanders again. Oops.

"Did everything go as planned?" Mike asked as the three of them made their way next door to the library.

"Well, there was a bit of a snafu with Sanders coming back to the library and discovering that we were all gone," Dustin explained calmly, even in the face of Mike and El's suddenly aghast expressions. "But no worries, Will managed to come up with an excuse— although it wasn't a great one," he added, looking like he would've done better when Mike knew for a fact his excuses were just as terrible as anything Will could come up with. "So as long as we're all there by the time she next checks on us, we should be fine. Except no one really knows where Lucas is..."

Mike could see this for himself when they entered the library and found only Will, Max, and a still-sleeping Bobby Hastings (really, was there something wrong with that guy? Sleeping that much was simply not normal...). Once Max and Dustin had filled them in on everything that went on at the Teacher's Lounge and Will sheepishly explained the alibi he'd come up with for them (which was actually pretty great in content if not in execution), they went back to figuring out what to do about Lucas. "Do you think he got caught?" Max asked, concerned.

"I think Sanders would've brought him back here already if he had been," Dustin argued back, and Mike agreed.

"I can try to find him if you want," El suggested, pointing in the

direction of the supply closet again.

Mike was just about to argue that going back out might be counterproductive when he heard something odd. "Did you guys hear that?" It was sort of like a knock? But it seemed too close to be the library door and, anyway, why would anyone be knocking on the library door?

His friends dutifully quieted down, and then the sound happened again, clearer this time. "I heard it, too," Will chimed in, the others nodding in agreement. Will stood up from his seat and made his way to the back of the library, behind the tall bookshelves, the rest of them following at his heels.

He stopped somewhere in the middle of the back reading area, right in front of the doors that led to the individual study rooms, and looked up. "Is someone... is someone knocking on the ceiling?" Out of context it would sound like a completely absurd sentence, but when the sound came again, Mike knew Will had it right.

Then a ceiling tile slid abruptly to the side, and they all screamed and jumped back, their brains immediately sounding off alarms about demogorgons even though a demogorgon moved through portals between dimensions and therefore wouldn't bother physically removing ceiling tiles.

Lucas poked his head out of the newly made hole in the ceiling. "It's me! Calm down, it's me!"

"Jesus Christ," Dustin panted from where he'd fallen on the ground, shoulder wedged against a bookshelf.

"What are you *doing* up there?" Max questioned, looking up at Lucas's head, which was hanging down from the ceiling, with a dumbstruck expression.

"Sanders accidentally locked me in the storage room!" Lucas answered in a hurried manner. "This was the only way I could get out of there. Now, will someone please help me get down from here?!"

After some very clumsy attempts at acrobatics, a very awkward

upside-down hug with Mike, and a few not-entirely-accidental instances of stepping on Dustin's face, they finally managed to get Lucas down and to the safety of solid ground. The first thing he did when he was right side up again was point at Dustin with a dark look and declare, "Never again." Dustin raised his hands as if in surrender.

Unfortunately for them, Ms. Sanders had heard their screams as she made her way back to this side of the building and rushed to the library to find out what the ruckus had been all about. So they had to come up with *another* bogus excuse.

Fortunately, it worked. Then again, that was probably because Ms. Sanders was relieved to see them all looking so well-hydrated for once.

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By the time their detention period was nearly over, they had all been sent to the back of the library, because Ms. Sanders had called in a repairman to fix the library door and she didn't want the noise to distract them from their studies (hah!). Bobby had woken up right on time to ask for permission to go to the bathroom, and once he walked out of the library they didn't hear from him again. Max wouldn't be surprised if he just fell asleep on the toilet or something.

Instead of taking the tables, the group instead chose to hang out in the back corner, sitting on the floor in something of a circle. Max, who was sitting in the corner, nestled between two bookcases, looked around at her friends. Eleven was sitting to her left, back against a bookcase, with Mike stretched between them, his head resting on her lap. She was stroking his hair and smiling down at him as he animatedly recounted some nerdy theory about some book he'd read, and it was so disgustingly cute, Max almost wanted to retch. (Except she didn't, not really).

Will was directly in front of Eleven, keeping himself upright against the foot of one of the tables, his Geometry textbook on his lap; he was using it as a solid surface so he could write Max's new

disciplinary note. He had to practice first, though, so he'd already gone through a few blank notes, writing on them over and over until he could get the handwriting to a close-enough likeness.

Lucas sat to her right, legs stretched out in front of him, and Dustin sat sideways to *his* right, propping himself up with an arm against the bookshelf. Both of them kept interrupting Mike periodically to add more detail to his explanation (or, more often than not, to correct something they thought he'd said wrong). Max had no doubt the conversation would soon devolve into an argument, so when she spoke up, she was doing it for them, honestly.

"Hey, guys," she started, "you really didn't have to do this, you know."

They all exchanged a glance and a chuckle. "Uh, yes, we did," Dustin asserted without even stopping for a moment to think about it. Like it was obvious, a no-brainer.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't risk my neck to crawl on the ceiling for just anyone!" Lucas said, and it was both a reassurance of their friendship and the fifth time he'd bragged about his "incredible feat of survival" in the last half hour.

"We wanted to help," Will told her with a smile.

"Exactly," Mike concurred. "You're in the party now, Max. That means you get our help, whether you ask for it or not." El nodded, smiling her way, too. The recognition meant a lot to her especially coming from those two, who took the longest to accept her into the group. But now they had, and she'd never been gladder for it than today.

Well, a couple of terrifying Upside Down encounters notwithstanding.

She didn't want to sound mushy or anything, but she was really happy they were her friends. Even if they were a bunch of nerds. Despite everything, she'd really lucked out when her family moved to Hawkins. She gave them all a small smile. "Thanks, guys. That really means a lot."

"Awww, we love you, M&Ms!" Dustin said in a teasing tone, with a shit-eating grin, making dimples in his cheeks with his fingers. "Even

if you drag us into girls' locker rooms and land us in detention."

She rolled her eyes at the ridiculous nickname, pinning him with a glare. "I told you never to call me that, *Dusty*," she retorted to get back at him, knowing his mother was the only person he didn't mind calling him that. "Besides, at least you can explain the locker room thing away. I mean, it's not like you got detention for, say..." She turned her head to look pointedly at Mike and Eleven. "...Skipping class to make out."

Lucas pushed himself away from the bookshelf in surprise. "Whaaaaaaat?"

"No way!" Dustin bellowed out, already starting to laugh, looking like Christmas had come early.

"Seriously?" Will asked, grinning madly in Mike and El's direction.

"Oh, God." Mike's face went as red as Max's hair, almost fluorescent to the point that they could still see it even after he covered his face with his hands. "How do you even know that?" he asked in a whine, his voice muffled by his palms.

"It's on your disciplinary note!" Max replied gleefully, between snickers. "I was looking for mine in the Teacher's Lounge, and there it was, in black and white: 'Truancy and public displays of affection on school grounds.'" The description only made the guys laugh even harder.

"Come on, guys," El intervened, not as flustered as Mike was— she was even smiling a little— but still a little red in the face, although she was always quick to jump to his defense. "Mike was only trying to make me feel better."

"Yeah— with his tongue!" Dustin wheezed out between hiccuping laughs, tears nearly running down his cheeks from guffawing so hard.

"Wait, wait," Lucas waved to get their attention, gasping for air. "You mean to tell me you were caught making out behind the bleachers by *Mr. Carr*? How are you even alive right now?" he asked, the last sentence interrupted continually by wheezes.

"It was an accident!" Mike growled back at him, frustrated.

"What, you *accidentally* tripped and fell on El's lips?" Will asked with a grin, and just the fact that *Will*, of all people, was getting in on the teasing was enough to break what little composure Max had left—she doubled over, holding her stomach, which felt like she'd done 100 sit-ups just by laughing so hard.

"Augh, shoot me now," Mike groaned, turning to the side and hiding his face against El's tummy in an uncanny imitation of an ostrich hiding its head in the sand.

"That tickles," she told him with a giggle.

"Sorry," he replied, smiling up at her as he pulled back.

"I don't mind," El retorted, smiling back before leaning down to peck his lips quickly. It was the most innocent kiss you'd ever see in your life, but even so, the reaction was immediate.

"Ugh, *must* you?!"

"Nooooo, my eyes!"

"Eww, get a room!" Max chimed in along with the others, throwing in a mock-gagging gesture for good measure, even though secretly she thought it was sweet. Not that she'd ever say that out loud, of course, but those two had been an item since before she'd met either of them, so she couldn't help but think they were cute. She was pretty sure they all thought that, no matter how much they loved teasing them.

"Seriously, guys, did you not get enough of that in the supply closet?" Dustin intervened, shaking his head.

"You caught them making out in the supply closet?!" Lucas screeched, seeming more and more like his head was going to explode every time another one of these embarrassing revelations came up. He smushed his face against the nearest bookshelf and laughed until he cried, his hand slapping the books in tandem with his gasps for air.

"Well, I wouldn't say I *caught* them," Dustin clarified, "but I have my suspicions..." Mike was going red again and Eleven was looking

everywhere but at them, so of course they all knew it was true.

Mike's response this time was to very carefully and deliberately flip all of them off, prompting another round of raucous laughter.

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Putting Max's fake disciplinary note back where Ms. Sanders would find it was easier than stealing it in the first place. While Ms. Sanders was dealing with the repairman at the office, El and Max snuck out to push the rectangular piece of paper under the door of the Teacher's Lounge. El pushed it just a little further in with her powers, so that it would look like it had fallen out of the folder on its own. Ms. Sanders would be none the wiser. Once the last part of the plan was complete, the girls hurried back to the library, where they waited for their detention period to be finally over.

When Ms. Sanders popped back into the library, a not-quite-fully-awake but awake-enough-to-walk-on-his-own Bobby Hastings trailing behind her, she called roll for the last time and released them from their punishment. She didn't catch any differences regarding the fake note, the parents had already signed them all out— their plan had worked. Not without a few bumps in the road, but it all worked out in the end.

They wanted to cheer, but that could arouse Ms. Sanders' suspicions, so they settled for grinning ecstatically at each other as they picked up their stuff and quietly filed out of the library.

"Hey, Max?" El sidled up to the redhead as they walked through the hallways toward the main exit, where their parents would be waiting for them. "I wanted to say... if things ever get really bad at your house, you know you can come to mine, right?"

"Same goes for me," Mike chimed in from where he was walking a few steps behind them.

"Me too," Will agreed, with Lucas throwing out a similar sentiment

from the back of the group, while Dustin nodded.

Max stopped momentarily to look at all of them. "Thanks, guys," she started, "I really appreciate that, but I don't want to inconvenience you with the mess that is my family. I can handle it. I don't want to get you in trouble with your parents or anything."

"My mom won't mind," Will was quick to assure her, and Eleven couldn't help but agree. As far as she was concerned, Joyce Byers was an angel sent from heaven. She would never turn away a child in danger, especially not any friend of her son's; she knew that from experience.

"We'll deal with our parents, don't worry about it," Lucas declared, waving off her protests.

"Yeah," Dustin agreed. "I mean, I don't know if you know this, but Mike hid a girl in his basement for like an entire week just a couple years ago and his parents never figured it out until the government showed up at their door to tell them she was a Russian spy." He smirked. "You're not a Russian spy, are you?"

Mike rolled his eyes, but the rest of them chuckled. "Hah! You wish," Max retorted, shaking her head.

But El was insistent. "Really, Max. You can come to my house," she repeated. "Any day, any time. My dad can help." Because being the daughter of the Chief of Police might have its downsides, but El wouldn't change it for the world, because living with Hopper, she felt protected. Sometimes a little too protected, but she could negotiate around that. It was a central tenet of El's new life: Jim Hopper was a protector; even if he grumbled about it, he would go out of his way to help anyone who truly needed it, including Max. There was nowhere safer in all of Hawkins than by his side.

Max looked at her, still reticent. "I know he'll try, but he won't be able to do much unless my mom files a complaint. Which she never will," she added, looking dejected. She sounded like she knew what she was talking about; maybe she'd read up on it or something.

"Well, think about it this way," Mike input, always looking for a silver

lining, "at least if you come to us— any of us— we can help you get out of the house and away from your stepdad for a little while, if worse comes to worst." He smiled at her. "You don't have to go at it alone, Max." The others nodded in agreement.

El was the only one who shook her head. "Dad will help," she maintained, and when Max looked like wanted to try one last-ditch objection, she added, "You were going to punch Stacey for what she said about me. That's what friends do."

Max hesitated for a second before throwing her arms around El. El hugged her back, glad that she could at least do something, however small, to help her. She knew a thing or two about abusive guardians and did not want to see anyone go through that, especially not her friend. She couldn't magically make Max's home life all good, but she could at least try and keep her from harm, through Hopper... or whatever it took.

"Aww," Dustin said from the side, using that tone El recognized whenever he was about to tease someone. "This seems like a good moment for a group hug, guys," he proposed with a grin.

Max pulled away from El like she'd been shocked with electricity. "No," she warned him, looking at Dustin with her eyebrows raised high on her forehead.

"Yes," Dustin countered, still grinning, as he opened his arms wide and walked toward them slowly— absurdly slowly, considering he was only a couple of feet away to begin with.

"No."

"Yes."

"No. Dustin, stop it—" Before she could finish the sentence, Dustin was already engulfing both of them in his arms, so tight that at one point El thought he might've managed to lift them off the ground for a second or so. Then Lucas, Will, and Mike were joining the fray, and Max's objections dissolved into laughter as the entire party became a tangle of limbs and joy in the middle of an empty Hawkins High hallway.

They split up once they walked outside, promising to meet up during the weekend— at least those who weren't grounded— before going to their respective cars. El caught sight of the Blazer parked just off to the side of the entrance, right where Hopper had dropped her off that morning, and the Wheelers' station wagon not too far in front of it.

She turned to say goodbye to Mike, but before she could speak, he pulled her slightly to the side by the hand. "Hey, so," he started, a little unsure, "I won't be able to hang out with you guys over the weekend, but I'll call you on the radio tonight, okay?"

"Okay," she responded, with a smile. It sucked that she would only be able to see him at school for the next two weeks, but maybe he'd manage to convince his mother to unground him earlier than intended? He was good at that sort of thing.

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but whatever it was, he didn't say it, so she took her chance to lean forward and give him a kiss— a quick one this time, just as a goodbye. "I'll talk to you tonight," she echoed, happy despite having just lost an entire Saturday to detention.

"Yeah," he said, smiling as well. "Tonight."

She walked backward to the truck, not wanting to take her eyes off him, their hands still touching until the widening gap between them forbade it. Once she sat in the passenger seat of the Blazer, she saw Hopper giving her a *look*. Clearly he'd been watching through the rearview mirror, and had just seen them kiss.

She threw him a deadpan stare. "Don't say anything."

He shook his head, almost too casual. "Wasn't gonna." Once again the corners of his mouth betrayed him, but in his defense, he did manage not to bring it up as he started the ignition and pulled away from the school.

She was sure he'd make *some* comment about it soon enough, though, but she didn't really mind.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't know that anyone actually pays attention to this stuff other than me, but through the course of this story I tried to make sure I gave all six characters a section from their PoV, even if some were shorter than others. It was my first time writing from Max's and Lucas's PoV, too, so that was fun! Also, Twix is a biscuit-and-chocolate bar by Mars, Inc. that's been around in the US since the late 70s. You can find them all over the place even now, I'm sure.

Hey, look! Shorter notes this time! It's a New Year's miracle. Have a happy turn of the year, everybody!
=)